Scopolamine: The Realities of Devil's Breath in Colombia

Posted by Jeff | Dec 4, 2018 | Expat Tips, Security and Safety | 30

Scopolamine, also known as Devil's Breath, is a drug used in Colombia for the purpose of robbery. But there are a number of urban myths circulating about Scopolamine.

Reportedly there are about 50,000 cases of scopolamine poisoning in Colombia each year. Poisoning with this drug is sometimes a method used by robbers, although this has been exaggerated with many unfounded urban myths.

I recently met a foreigner in Medellín who was a victim of scopolamine. And he recommended that I cover this on the Medellin Guru website.

This foreigner told me he went to a bar with a girl he had just met. And he believes this girl spiked his drink. He didn't remember anything until he woke in a motel the next day feeling as if he had big night of partying.

He felt dehydration, dizziness, nausea and head/body aches. And all his cash and his cell phone were gone. Luckily, he still had the keys to the hotel he was staying in. Also, he went to a hospital where it was confirmed that he was a victim of scopolamine.

Note the above photo is the scopolia plant, from which scopolamine is made, photo by Jorge Láscar.

What is Scopolamine (Devil's Breath)?

Scopolamine, also known as "devil's breath", burundanga and hyoscine, is a chemical substance that is made from the scopolia plant. This plant is most commonly found near Bogotá and also in the departments of Atlántico and Magdalena in Colombia.

Scopolamine (Hyoscine) was first written about in 1881 and started to be used for anesthesia around 1900. Hyoscine is produced from plants of the nightshade family. The name "scopolamine"

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is derived from one type of nightshade known as Scopolia while the name "hyoscine" is derived from another type known as Hyoscyamus niger.

Hyoscine has a number of legitimate medical uses including:

- Postoperative nausea and vomiting and sea sickness
- Motion sickness (often applied as a transdermal patch behind the ear)
- Gastrointestinal spasms
- Renal or biliary spasms
- Aid in gastrointestinal radiology and endoscopy
- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Eye inflammation

Hyoscine is considered anti-spasmodic in low doses and may be used to relax smooth muscle tissue or prevent motion-sickness induced nausea. Scopolamine is even considered by some a miracle drug that helps with motion sickness and severe nausea.

Also, it is sometime used as a premedication (especially to reduce respiratory tract secretions) before surgery.

In addition, scopolamine is known to produce a loss of memory and hallucinations following exposure to larger doses, which is similar to the effect of benzodiazepines or alcohol poisoning, which can affect the ability to resist criminal aggression.

Furthermore, scopolamine has been occasionally used recreationally for its hallucinogenic properties. But the experiences are often unpleasant, mentally and physically. It is also physically dangerous, so repeated use is very rare.

Why is Scopolamine (Devil's Breath) Dangerous?

VICE produced a widely-viewed documentary in 2012 (seen above) that shows that the effects of scopolamine, which include extreme susceptibility and amnesia.

In higher doses it is a poison having hallucinogenic and memory-inhibiting effects. And it can render a victim unconscious for 24 hours or more. Also, in very high doses, it can cause respiratory failure and even death.

In addition, it's tasteless and odorless. So, it's quite easy to slip into drinks and food. And once consumed, it can cause a range of psychoses including disorientation, paranoia and hallucinations.

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Urban myth – transmitted by business card, photo by Wellcome Images

Urban Myths About Scopolamine (Devil's Breath)

There a few common urban myths about scopolamine:

1. Can you be drugged with a business card?

There is an urban myth circulating that a transcutaneous delivery mechanism using business cards, pamphlets or flyers laced with the drug, can be effective.

However, this is an urban myth. The quantity of toxin diffusing through the skin barrier after one short contact of the fingers with an object like a business card is considered by medical professionals to be too small of an amount to be readily absorbed in the body and unlikely to have any significant effect.

The bottom line is that skin exposure is very unlikely, as the dose that can be absorbed by the skin is too low to have any effect.

In addition, studies by the Colombian Neurological Association (ACN) have found that in 75 percent of scopolamine cases, the drug was administered by someone who mixed it into their drink.

Also, if someone were to take scopolamine tablets and pulverize them into a powder and blow it into your face, medical professionals consider this not having much effect.

2. Will you turn into a zombie?

This is unlikely. There is a lack of any conclusive proof of scopolamine's usefulness as a zombification drug. But this has not stopped people from trying to stretch its actual documented effects.

Scopolamine blocks neurotransmitters that carry information to the part of the brain that stores short-term memory. So, what actually happens to people under the effect of scopolamine is simply not recorded by the brain.

Law enforcement agencies have experimented with the use of scopolamine as a kind of "truth serum." However, it was reportedly ineffective for getting reliable information. Also, in experiments by law enforcement it didn't really cause people to follow suggestions or fall into a "zombie-like" state."

3. Is "Devil's Breath" really so common?

The U.S. State Department stated that "unofficial estimates put the annual scopolamine incidents in

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Colombia at approximately 50,000." However, scopolamine has a short life span in the human body – only around 12 hours. So, this makes is difficult to collect reliable statistics.

Also, if you use the 50,000 number, that is only about 0.1 percent of the population of Colombia at about 50 million. So, that is approximately 1 out of 1,000 people. In addition, according to ACN, about 20 percent of hospital admissions for poisoning in Bogotá are due to this drug.

But more commonly used drugs are cheaper benzodiazepine drugs like valium and Xanax. A study by ACN in Bogotá found that out of nearly 1,000 patients admitted for scopolamine poisoning, 43.7 percent had benzodiazepine drugs in their system and only 12.5 percent had scopolamine in their system.

One of the countless bars in Medellín

Avoiding Scopolamine (Devil's Breath) Incidents

The U.S. Embassy recommends that American citizens adhere to the following recommendations to minimize the likelihood of being victimized by scopolamine while in Colombia:

- Avoid going into bars or nightclubs alone (although groups have also been targeted)
- Never leave drinks or food unattended
- Do not accept food or drinks from strangers
- Do not leave bars, restaurants or nightclubs with strangers

And I would add to this list, be careful about inviting strangers to your home and seek medical assistance if you think you have been drugged.

The majority of these incidents tend to occur in night clubs and bars, and normally the victims are men, perceived to be wealthy, which are often targeted by young, attractive women.

According to an ACN study in Bucaramanga, 70 percent of victims of scopolamine poisoning were males between the age of 30 and 45 and in 94 percent of cases, the motive was robbery.

In addition, we have additional security tips in our article about security in Medellín and safety tips for expats.

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Hospital Pablo Tobón Uribe, the best hospital in Medellín, photo by SajoR

What to do if a Victim of Scopolamine (Devil's Breath)

If you are a victim, you should get medical help and see a doctor. And if the symptoms are severe, go to a hospital. Also, here is a list of the 24 best hospitals in Colombia. Nine of these best hospitals are in Medellín and nine are in Bogotá.

In addition, if you are a U.S. citizen, you should contact the U.S. embassy in Bogotá to report the incident. The embassy is staffed 24×7 and can contact the local Colombian authorities on your behalf to encourage the authorities to fully investigate.

Furthermore, to get a report needed for insurance claims and obtaining new documents, the best place to do this is at a Unidades de Reacción Inmediata office. In Medellín, this office is located at Calle 72 # 64 E-139, which is open 24 hours.

Also, there is also a Facebook group called Colombia Scopolamine Victims & Alerts created a few months ago that aims to share information about the criminals doing this. So, others can avoid going out on dates with them and avoid being the next victim.

Medellín Scopolamine Statistics

According to an article in March 2019 in El Colombiano (in Spanish), during a period of three years from 2016 to 2018, 602 people were affected by thefts in Medellín at the hands of criminals who drugged their victims. And 208 of these cases were in 2018. Note that not all of these cases were scopolamine, as other drugs such as benzodiazepine and phenothiazine are also used.

According to the Fiscalía investigation of a number of these cases, bars, taverns and nightclubs are the places where contacts are most established between the perpetrator and his victim, with 228 cases in the last two years. This is followed by taxis (45); social networks like Facebook, Tinder, Badoo and Colombian Cupid (17); and the house of the victim (14).

The places where thefts using drugs are concentrated, according to the Police and Prosecutor's Office, are locations that are characterized by the presence of bars, clubs and restaurants, with a large number of visitors and foreigner tourists. The majority of the drugging cases were in the following locations in Medellín:

- La Candelaria (El Centro): Parque del Periodista, Plaza de Botero, Parque de San Antonio, Barrio El Chagualo, University of Antioquia (Along Calle 67-Barranquilla), Calle 33 with Av. Oriental (barrio San Diego), barrio San Benito and Calle 58 with Carrera 47.
- El Poblado: Parque Lleras and Parque El Poblado.
- Laureles: LA 70 (Carrera 70 between the Metro station Estadio and U.P.B.); Zona Rosa LA 33 (Calle 33 between Avenida 80 and Carrera 65).
- Itagüí: Barrio San Fernando, sector La Raya, Central Mayorista.

Also, keep in mind that many cases of drugging may not be reported. So, the count is likely much higher.

Furthermore, there is a Colombia Scopolamine Victims & Alerts group on Facebook. This group is intended to help share and spread information about scopolamine incidents in Colombia. Victims commonly share their experiences in this group.

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commonly share their experiences in this group.

Medellin Guru's Safety and Security Series

Safety is the biggest concern of foreigners visiting Colombia or planning to move to Colombia. So, we have a series of 15 popular articles about safety and security in Colombia:

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The Bottom Line: Scopolamine (Devil's Breath)

The bottom line is that there are some urban myths circulating about scopolamine and it's been sensationalized. But the use of drugs like scopolamine to incapacitate and rob victims in Colombia can and does happen.

In over eight years living in Medellín, I have only met one expat who was a victim of scopolamine poisoning. However, I have heard it's more common in Bogotá.

Also, most of the scopolamine incidents happen to people at night at bars and nightclubs. So, take care and don't leave drinks or food unattended or accept drinks or food from strangers.

Do you believe you or someone you know has been affected by scopolamine?

Sign up for the Free Medellin Guru Newsletter – You can see all of the previous Medellin Guru weekly email newsletters and sign up here.

Editors note: updated on July 31, 2019 with Medellín scopolamine statistics and locations in Medellín where the most drugging of victims occurred in the past two years.

Editors note: updated on October 30, 2019 with new 2019 hospital rankings in Latin America.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff

Jeff is the founder and editor-in-chief of Medellin Guru. He first discovered Colombia back in 2006 and has traveled to all the major cities in Colombia. Jeff is fortunate to have lived over eight years in Medellín. He has traveled to over 40 countries and hasn't found a place he prefers living in more than Medellín.

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30 Comments

Ron on December 4, 2018 at 8:07 am

Do not be fooled into a false sense of security as to the harsh reality of this drug and roofies that are also used by Would be thieves who pose as ordinary attractive locals It is dangerous and deadly, and the lowlifes who would drug us have no problem dosing us with what can amount to lethal quantities. DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE this deadly drug for an instant. It has left many of its victims both expats and local Colombians neurologically damaged for LIFE. Ask local law enforcement, Doctors, the US embassy website and do all due diligence. Do not allow anyone to even remotely suggest that there are myths about this toxic and deadly substance administered by some of the lowest street urchins in this country. I have personally known several victims and have studied this subject intensively as I am a qualified health care professional. CADC USA drug treatment professional. This drug absolutely will render you helpless and completely at the mercy of the people who have drugged you. You will appear normal to others who will have no idea you have been drugged. Thieves can lead you around to arms and empty your bank accounts and can take you to your house or apartment and get you to empty its contents and you will remember NOTHING. Of that I can guarantee you. Do your due diligence. A word to the wise is sufficient. Never leave your cocktail unattended even for a millisecond. Don't allow anyone to ask directions and hand you a piece of paper for you to inspect. These criminals know how to dose us in ways unimaginable. Be careful and do not let your guard down even for a second.

David on February 21, 2021 at 10:29 pm

Ron, I appreciate all your comments under this article and they have deterred me from travelling to Colombia alone in the near future. I still have a lot to learn regarding safety and all the possible con games. It disappoints me that it's so risky to get to know local latinas in a club or at

the beach. And having to be so careful with my drinks and food around them because they could use such a harmful drug. This is unthinkable here in Europe where it is no problem to meet new girls in a bar and have drinks with them.

Ron on June 4, 2021 at 12:14 am

There are many nice and perhaps not so nice women here who wouldn't think about drugging anyone. Don't be disuaded from coming here. Bad things can happen anywhere on earth. There are basic rules to follow here. Abiding by those rules is the best protection to avoid being taken for a ride. Colombia is wonderful. Medellin guru has provided many helpful guidelines visitors can refer to, in order to be safe.

Lawrence R Rose on December 4, 2018 at 8:13 am

Great article. Someone told me not to accept any handouts or flyers on the street. After six years of accepting handouts and flyers on the street I have yet to be poisoned. Folks say a lot of things. Like the business card urban myth.

Jeff on December 4, 2018 at 12:54 pm

Hi Lawrence, thanks. After I talked to the expat who was a victim of scopolamine I wanted to help get the word out and also cover the urban myths about scopolamine.

Steven Babbe on March 18, 2019 at 8:41 pm

To Jeff, thanks for the posts, We also have this plant in Nicaragua, grows wild. I picked some and had it in the vehicle and all 5 of us were falling asleep in minutes, my native friend said to get rid of it, we threw it out the window. They say some locals use it for medicine, even heard one lady poisoned her child with it by trying to keep her calm, overdosed and the child is not doing well,(at that time about 15 years ago)
It is very powerful and not to be reckoned with. Thanks for all your info you post.
Hopefully retiring there in a few years.

Ron on March 18, 2019 at 10:30 pm

There are some very enlightening videos on youtube some in english some in spanish and english. Include in the search Borrachero.
One video that tells it all is. "What VICE didn't tell you about Borrachero"
Vice Video "World's Scariest Drug".
There was a major article in El Colombiano recently warning about a major uptick in dosings. Don't be taken in by expats minimalizing. Many have been lucky or smart enough to stay away from the bars / prepago web sites. So many tourists choose to walk on the wild side and those are the ones at greatest risk. Don't let your guard down not for a moment. Watch the videos.

Normand Bouchard on April 16, 2020 at 2:05 am

Hi Jeff ,
Last Saturday I invited a girl that i met in tinder and was during the curfew . I invited her for dinner and after a few drink I got poison by this drug and she was with a guy that I just remembered to see him

was with a guy that I just remembered to see him . They stolen money , my computer and phone and watch . They didn't brought my passport or credit card . I went to the police and brought me to the hospital but I was ok . My Apple account has been lock so far But a friend of mine saw my whatapp open so I might be able to trace them ! My questions is how I can prosecute them ? The police don't seem to be to cooperative at all . I have the picture of the girl too . Thanks you and hopefully i get answer from you .

Karl on August 2, 2020 at 1:42 pm

I have a friend that was a victim of "Devils Breathe". I agree that simple skin contact wont be enough to get you, but having the powder blown into your face can get you. This is apparently what happened to my friend. She has no memory after a person asked her what time it was when she was walking through Medellin.
3 Days later she came back to nearly normal, had no memory of the last 3 days. Her assets were all stolen. The hospital verified that it was "Devils Breathe".

Jeremy on December 4, 2018 at 11:39 am

Thank you for bringing awareness and exposure to this issue.

This is becoming a real issue in Medellin. While you say you have heard about it more in Bogota, it seems to be on a major uptick in Medellin, due to Tinder. There is possibly organized criminal rings that are using pretty girls to go on dates with foreigners from Tinder, drug them, and rob them. It has been a common trend and the same girls days later try to do it again. They need to be caught and stopped.

There is also a very good group on Facebook called "Colombia Scopolamine Victims & Alerts" that aims to share information about the criminals doing this, so others can avoid going out on dates with them or avoid being the next victim. The Facebook group can be found here — https://www.facebook.com/groups/505090533291532/

Jeff on December 4, 2018 at 12:52 pm

Hi Jeremy, thanks I added info about that Facebook group to the article.

GATO on December 4, 2018 at 11:47 am

This also happened to an employee of a coffee business. He was forced to withdraw the company banking account causing serious setback for the business and investors. The CEO now require multiple people to approve banking operations

Ron on December 4, 2018 at 12:13 pm

How sad. I am pleased to see that there are others out here who have first hand knowledge. The more awareness there is out here less likely others will be victimized. Unfortunately the RATAS out there who prey on the innocent are so very clever. Hypervigiance is essential to staying safe here Colombia a country wonderful but more dangerous than most of us really know. The criminal element here will go to ANY length to steal what does not belong to them.

Ron on December 4, 2018 at 1:21 pm

I have an issue with the word "myths". There is nothing mythical about being victimized by lazy good for nothing thieves who hold no regard for human life. This is a very serious issue here in Medellin and throughout Colombia. If you have even been in the

company of these perpetrators or witnessed many YouTube videos on this subject it is enough to send chills up and down one's spine. Devils breath/ scopolamine comes from the Borrachero tree. Just being in close proximity to this tree can prove hazardous. The seeds of fruit from this tree are beyond deadly. Locals steer clear from this tree and its droppings. Locals know the truth and consequences of coming into contact with the seeds. You tube videos such as "world's scariest drug: Colombian devils breath Google that and many YouTube videos will pop up. I recommend watching ALL of them. Borrachero, scolpalamine and burandanga are searches well worth performing. Knowledge is power. In Australia these drugs are termed "Zombie Drug". Enjoy Colombia and one need not be paranoid and totally freaked out by all this, but complacency and an attitude of scorn and humor are best left at the departure lounge before boarding a flight Colombia. This is not the Magic Kingdom in Disney. NO IT IS NOT.

John on December 4, 2018 at 7:06 pm

Two friends earlier this year met some girls in Parque Lleras and the girls recommended going to a club. After a few drinks my friends didn't remember anything but when they woke they were back in their apartment in Provenza with money, cell phones and computers stolen. My friends said the girls seemed normal but clearly their drinks were spiked by the girls. Be VERY CAREFUL.

Ron on December 4, 2018 at 8:26 pm

This is exactly what we are talking about. A word to the men here who must indulge themselves with strange Colombian pick up girls and think how macho and tough they are. YOU are no match for these girls who know what to say and how to dress and sucker us out of our possessions. So many of these chicas in poblado at parque lleras and 70 are wolves in sheep's clothing. Don't trust even the most innocent looking ones. Not for one single solitary moment. Asking for a copy of their cedula (national identification card). and photocopying it might protect you. 2 reasons. Some girls here are minors posing as adults. You can go to jail for a long time for getting involved with a minor here or they can extort you for big money threatening to report you. This happens all day long here to unsuspecting sex seeking tourists who think they know it all and come here thinking thinking this is a country filled with young innocent girls / women looking for a nice gringo or European man. False myth. Best to meet mommy and know where these girls live before getting robbed or worse. An ounce of prevention can save you from endless grief. There are many very fine and down to earth women here. Unfortunately many of us are attracted to ones that are anything but down to earth. Watch your back and never turn your back to your cocktail.

Tom on December 5, 2018 at 8:19 am

Thanks, this is a helpful article that should be required reading for any foreigner visiting Colombia.

Megan on December 5, 2018 at 1:52 pm

This is so interesting. Thanks for sharing it!

Ron on December 5, 2018 at 3:09 pm

Understand one thing. Medellin and all of Colombia is wonderful and the majority of my many years here have been very sweet but my activities here lately have required me to become hyper vigilant because the levels of crime have increased due to many factors. Don't let your guard down and be suspicious and wary and expect the unexpected here. The criminal element here is cunning and baffling and dangerous and will not hesitate to use deadly violence to get what they want. They are desperate and ruthless and merciless and that is no myth or exaggeration. My attorney and mother were robbed at gunpoint in front of their fashionable and safe and luxurious apartment building in the finest part of this city. This would not have happened to the degree it is happening just a few short years ago. The city is glorious and perilous and very affluent and that is why so many thieves play their trade here.

Clarence on December 11, 2018 at 8:06 pm

Well, this is all very interesting and I'm thankful for now being informed. Yet, it will not deter my future plan to move to Colombia. I visited Bogota and Medellin for the first time back in September. I fell in love with Medellin. My eleven days visit was very delightful! I do recall warnings about certain things to look out for in my research prior to my visit. While I was getting a haircut in Bogota, a young lady came in and offered me a cup of some type of liquor, which I politely refused. Now,after this scopolamine reading, I'm really glad I did!
I was followed by two guys in Medellin while on the bus. I was staying in the Poblado area. They got on while I was downtown. I think the bus driver knew as well, because he let me off at at another hotel where I wouldn't have a long walk. I took a cab from there to my hotel. Both guys got off at the very next stop, which to me, confirmed my suspicions. Also on the bus one of them kept changing seats. So, at one point I got up and went to the door as if I was getting off, but instead took another seat near the back door. That, too, was a point when one of the two guys moved to a different seat.
The people I met while in Colombia were overall very kind, polite, respectful and helpful. In a year I plan to retire and move there after I get much more fluent with my Spanish.

John Morris on July 15, 2019 at 7:56 am

I understand if you're too busy to reply to this. I'm writing a novel set in England and have two questions:
1. Is scopolamine /Devil's Breath detectable in an autopsy?
2. Is the drug in England yet?
Thanks,
John.

Jeff on July 15, 2019 at 10:02 am

A simple google search finds this article about Scopolamine reaching the UK – https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5158857/Colombian-Devils-Breath-drug-UK-online-11.html

And, yes scopolamine is detectable in an autopsy.

Vic on August 2, 2019 at 7:30 pm

A renter of my apartment left a bottle of what appears to be pharmaceutical grade liquid scopolamine eye drops. Does such a thing exist? If so, it appears he or his guest was using the stuff recreationally. Is that even a thing?

Jeff on August 2, 2019 at 11:19 pm

Yes, there is a scopolamine solution. It has a legitimate use — it is used to widen the pupils for eye examination or eye surgery and also to decrease pain and swelling from an inflammation of the eye. See: https://www.medicinenet.com/scopolamine_drops-ophthalmic/article.htm

Reportedly a few party drug enthusiasts experiment with scopolamine because of its euphoric and hallucinatory effects. But with lack of control, loss of memory and unconsciousness it's not considered a pleasant recreational drug.

Ron on August 2, 2019 at 11:41 pm

This is Medellín Colombia .there are enough recreational substances here common and available where one has some idea on how to use them safely. Why mess with something so completely toxic. A word to the wise. Only by alcoholic

beverages in recognized legitimate stores like Exito, Carulla. Major supermarkets. Many of the little wholesale bodegas are known to sell copies / bootlegs of common Rum and other alcoholic beverages. Make sure the DIAN tax stamp is official and securely affixed. Don't be fooled by bootleg/ counterfeit booze here.

Ron on August 2, 2019 at 11:15 pm

Recreationally??????? I CANT IMAGINE anyone in his or her right mind using it recreationally. It is toxic and a little too much will kill you. It is not to be played with. I have heard of people using the seeds i beleive. Do yourself a favor and don't give it another thought. People here cross the street where the borrachera tree grows. It is common knowledge here to avoid it at all costs.

Eddie on August 29, 2020 at 6:22 pm

50,000 annual occurrences means 137 people per day, which is 6 every hour...this is a lot. Saying 50,000 out of the entire population in Colombia is just 0.1% sounds little, but the reality is the concentration of these occurrences are in tourists towns of just a few cities of a rate of 6 people every hour, 137 people per day!

Rob on August 29, 2020 at 10:57 pm

Happened to a dear friend of mine the other day. This is a serious issue not to be discounted.

Shannon on June 2, 2021 at 11:34 pm

Yes. Happened to me in Ecuador and I don't know how I was dosed. Was something blown in the air at me? Was something put on my receipt from the grocery store? No joke. Walking home with groceries one moment, then notice visual field changes and time loss, a woman in front of me crouched down like she was going to tackle me with a white van door open; I started running for home. Made it in, locked the door, then couldn't move for over 4 hours, but was aware. Locked in syndrome with racing heart. Over a decade later, I still have neurological problems.

Sam on June 9, 2021 at 10:16 am

"In over eight years living in Medellín, I have only met one expat who was a victim of scopolamine poisoning." Damn, my first month I met 8 people, including me.

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